DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 281 CG 025 512

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TITLE Personal Adjustment of Puerto Rican Adolescents.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (101st, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 20-24, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; At Risk Persons; *Emotional Adjustment; High Schools; Hispanic Americans; Junior High Schools; Nuclear Family; *One Parent Family; Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Parenting Skills; *Puerto Rican Culture; *Puerto Ricans
IDENTIFIERS New York (Brooklyn); New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

Puerto Rican children and adolescents appear more at risk for below average school achievement and for mental health problems and service referrals than other Hispanic youngsters. This study examined the cognitive style and the emotional and behavioral patterns associated with the personal adjustment of 80 Puerto Rican adolescents from single-parent and dual-parent homes in Brooklyn, New York. Forty youths were from female-headed, single-parent homes and 40 were dual-parent families. To compare the adolescents' personal adjustment, questionnaires and self-reports measuring attribution style, depressive symptomatology, competent behaviors, and problem behaviors were completed by the participants. The mothers of the 80 adolescents also completed questionnaires but the self reports were completed as the mothers believed their sons or daughters would have completed them. Adolescents from the single-parent families reported more external problem behaviors than adolescents from dual-parent families. Puerto Rican male adolescents reported more competent behaviors than Puerto Rican female adolescents and male adolescents from dual-parent families revealed better personal adjustment than male adolescents from the single-parent families. Public programs and policy makers should consider the importance of the parental roles of single-parent and dual-parent families in the long term adjustment of children. (RJM)

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Personal Adjustment of Puerto Rican Adolescents

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the cognitive style, emotional and behavioral patterns associated with the personal adjustment of Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent, female headed homes as compared with Puerto Rican adolescents from dual parent families. Puerto Ricans represent the most rapidly growing minority group in the United States, and are the largest Hispanic population in New York City. Puerto Rican children and adolescents appear more at risk for below average school achievement, for dropping out of school, and for mental health problems and service referrals than other Hispanic group youngsters.

This study examined 80 Puerto Rican adolescents: 40 from female-headed single parent families, 40 from dual parent families; 40 female, 40 male. To compare the differences in personal adjustment between adolescents from single and dual parent families, questionnaires and self-reports measuring attribution style, depressive symptomatology, competent behaviors, and problem behaviors were completed by the selected adolescents. The mothers of the 80 adolescents also completed questionnaires but the self reports were completed as they believed their son or daughter would.

Results indicated that Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent families reported more external problem behaviors than adolescents from dual parent families. Puerto Rican male adolescents reported more competent behaviors than Puerto Rican female adolescents; and finally,Puerto Rican male adolescents from dual parent families revealed better personal adjustment than Puerto Rican male adolescents from single parent families. Puerto Rican female adolescents indicated no differences in personal adjustment whether they were from single or dual parent families.

Mediators for better personal adjustment for adolescents from single parent families were studied; lower interparental conflict levels, older at the age of separation, longer lengths of time since the separation, and more visitation of the father were considered factors positively correlated with personal adjustment. Only the cognitive variable, the level of optimistic explanations of life events, was predicted by a simultaneous regression model of mediators. Interparental conflict was a significant indicator of the amount of variance of personal adjustment in single parent adolescents.

This study supports the important influence that the father still has in the Puerto Rican family and with his adolescent son. The relationship with both parents is still an important factor in the personal adjustment of the Puerto Rican adolescent and can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon. Public policies and prevention and intervention programs should take into consideration the importance of the parental roles of single parent and dual parent families in the long term adjustment of their children even into adolescence.

The results of this study can be utilized in formulating prevention and intervention programs for at-risk Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent and dual parent families. As more research provides more understanding of the Puerto Rican single parent family, better services can be provided to help the needs of this population.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the cognitive style, emotional and behavioral patterns associated with the personal adjustment of Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent, female headed homes as compared with Puerto Rican adolescents from dual parent families. Puerto Ricans represent the most rapidly growing minority group in the United States, and are the largest Hispanic population in New York City. Puerto Rican children and adolescents appear more at risk for below average school achievement, for dropping out of school, and for mental health problems and service referrals than other Hispanic group youngsters.

The major social support network of the Puerto Rican community is the family whose functioning structure has been endangered by the migration experience, by the existence of pervasive racism, and by the multiple adjustments required by movement into a highly industrialized and urbanized milieu. Since the children and adolescents of Puerto Rican families are exposed to life situations which require change and adjustment, when the family, the traditional support system is disrupted by separation and divorce, the distress is doubly dysfunctional, particularly since the family is the fundamental integrating and identifying institution (Rogler et al., 1983). Furthermore, the cognitive and social development that the Puerto Rican adolescent is experiencing adds to the stress of acculturation for both the family and the adolescents since the values reinforced in the family are not those found primarily in the school.

Since little research has been conducted about the structure and alternative lifestyles of the Puerto Rican family, it was important to look at the studies of the general population examining separation, divorce, and

single parent families to help understand and predict what variables affect the adjustment of children and adolescents from single parent families. Separation and divorce involve a series of stressful experiences for the entire family and continues through the adaption to single parent life.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have been conducted comparing the adjustment and behavior of children from single parent families and from dual parent families. Although most found that children from single parent families have poorer adjustment intellectually, socially, and emotionally(Hetherington, 1981), there were many children who adjusted well and had relatively few long lasting negative effects to single parent life (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Natasi, & Lightel, 1986; Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981). Kurdek et al. (1981) focused on the variables to divorce adjustment and were particularly interested in the cognitive developmental perspective. They found that cognitive factors modulate children's perceptions of the divorce situation as a life stressor. Follow-up studies revealed that children's adjustment to single parenting was moderated by cognitive factors as well as their relationship with their custodial and non-custodial parents, age, and gender.

A child's perception and belief of control over important life outcomes arises from socialization experiences such as adjusting to a divorce in the family. Therefore, a child's perceptions can be changed or influenced during his or her adjustment to the divorce experience as well as moderating adjustment. Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, and Seligman (1991) researched children from single parent families and compared them to children from dual parent families using the reformulated learned helplessness model. They found that children from single parent homes had a more pessimistic view of attributing

the reason for life events occurring. The pessimistic explanatory style was correlated with higher levels of depression symptomatology and lower levels of achievement in school.

Relatively few studies have focused on adolescent adjustment to divorce and single parent families. However, the longitudinal studies have made some observations about adolescents and the long term effects of their experience and adjustment to single parent life. They found that adolescents are more anxious about their ability to have a successful marriage and have difficulties with interpersonal relationships.

This study looked at Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent families comparing them to Puerto Rican adolescents from dual parent families who are from the same socioeconomic status. Since there has been a consistent gender difference in personal adjustment in children and adolescents to divorce and the single lifestyle, gender was included as an independent variable. Furthermore, because the research and observations of children and adolescents form single parent homes indicated both positive, negative, and neutral results about the adjustment of adolescents, this study explored the conditions that facilitate positive adjustment of Puerto Rican from single parent homes.

Appropriateness of measurements had to be a consideration in conducting a research project especially with a minority group. The use of self-reports has been questioned due to the lack of construct validity in many of these measures, as well as the tendency for subjects to portray themselves in the most favorable light, thus subjecting self-report results to self-presentation effects (Funder, 1991). Subjects tend to be less than honest about themselves on structured questionnaires, as well (Kagan, 1988). To strengthen the

measurements, multitrait-multimethods were used in this study. Self-reports, significant other reports, and questionnaires were used as validation of the adolescent personal adjustment and self-reports.

Method

Participants and Setting

Eighty subjects from a Puerto Rican community in Brooklyn, New York were selected to participate in this study. The subjects were recruited from the public junior high schools and high schools in the community as well as a community center populated by Puerto Rican families. The community consists of 102,000, low socioeconomic residents, mostly Hispanic (over 60%) and largely of Puerto Rican descent. Ninety-five per cent of the school and community centers population is Hispanic.

Over 200 adolescents from 14-18 years old were contacted for participation. Informed consent were obtained from each subject's mother prior to participation in the study. After obtaining consent the mothers were asked to fill out a screening device that stipulated the approximate criteria necessary. The selection factors included: Puerto Rican Background of both mother and father; the age of the adolescent being between 14-18 years of age; dual parent families including the biological parents; single parent families consisted of the biological mother who has not remarried or is not co-habitating with anyone at the present time; the mother was head of the household due to a divorce or separation from the biological father; the biological father must have lived with the mother and child for some period of time. A pool of 80 participants were selected and both the adolescents and their mothers were asked to participate by filling out a set of questionnaires and self-reports.

Procedures

Once a pool of subjects were found that met the prescribed criteria a phone call was made to each subject according to the random tables until 80 subjects--40 males, 40 females; 40 from single parent families; 40 from dual parent families agreed to be interviewed with their mothers. Each participant was interviewed and given a package of questionnaires and self-reports to complete. The questionnaires were different for the dual parent family mother, the single parent family mother, the dual parent family adolescent and single parent family adolescent. The independent variables were family status and gender; the dependent variable was personal adjustment measured by self reports in three areas: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The cognitive area focused on attribution style as measured by the Children's Attribution Style Questionnaire; the emotional area focused on depressive symptomatology as measured by the Beck's Depression Inventory, and the area of behavior was measured by the Achenbach's Youth Self Report.

Correlates of positive adjustment to single parent families were explored as well. Noncustodial parental contact, level of conflict between the separated parents, time since separation, age at the time of separation as measured by questions in both the adolescents' and mothers' questionnaire were correlated with positive adjustment in single parent adolescents. Acculturation levels measured by a questionnaire and conflict levels in the family were analyzed for their relative effects on adolescent adjustment.

Results

Demographic and social data from both groups of families--single and dual parented were compared and found to be equivalent in all areas. Results of relationship between family structure and adolescent adjustment

using the t Test of Independent Means analysis indicated that Puerto Rican adolescents from single parent families reported a significant difference on the External scale of the Youth Self Report ($t(65.43) = 2.83$, $p = .01$) (See Table 1). From the Mothers' point of view, there was no significant difference between the two groups on the External scale of the Child Behavior Checklist ($t(77) = 1.60$, $p = .11$) (See Table 2). In other words, the group of adolescents from single parent families see themselves as displaying more externalized behavior--equivalent to aggressive and delinquent behaviors.

When comparing the responses of male and female Puerto Rican adolescents, a t Test of Independent Means analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between male and female adolescents on the Competency scale of the Youth Self Report ($t(49.41) = 1.97$, $p= .04$) (See Table 3). Male Puerto Rican adolescents see themselves as being more competent than female Puerto Rican adolescents in the areas of school, outside activities, and socially.

Using a simple comparison analysis with the modified Dunn-Bonferroni method to correct for Type I errors, Puerto Rican male adolescents from dual parent families revealed better personal adjustment than Puerto Rican male adolescents from single parent families (See Table 4). Puerto Rican female adolescents indicated no differences in personal adjustment whether they were from single or dual parent families (See Table 5).

Mediators for better personal adjustment for adolescents from single parent families were studied; lower interparental conflict levels, older at the age of separation, longer lengths of time since the separation, and more visitation of the father were considered factors positively correlated with personal adjustment. Only the cognitive variable, the level of optimistic

explanations of life events, was predicted by a simultaneous regression model of mediators (See Table 6). Interparental conflict was a significant indicator of the amount of optimistic viewpoints in single parent adolescents. Interpersonal conflict was also a significant factor in the difference of cognitive optimism of dual and single parent adolescents ($F(2,72) = 4.96$, $p<.01$).

Issues of parental relationships, visitation with the non-custodial father, adolescent functioning, future marriage plans, the effects of separation, and levels of emotionality were asked on the questionnaires. Comparisons revealed interesting and significant correlations between the adolescents' behavior and their relationships with their parents.

Parental Relationships

What was revealed was a consistently positive attitude about one's mother in both the adolescents from single and dual parented families. Optimistic causal attributions were correlated positively with the adolescents' relationship with their mothers. The adolescents' revealed a moderate level of positiveness in their relationships with their fathers, with no gender or family structure differences. The relationship between the parents was positively associated with the feelings of the adolescents toward their father($r = .57$ $p < .01$). The relationship with the adolescent's father was positively related to the amount of visitation that the father makes to the to the adolescent($r = .78$, $p < .01$). The relationship between the adolescent and the father was negatively related to the level of Total Problem Items subscale of the Achenbach's Youth Self-Report($r = -.28$, $p < .05$). In other words, the better the relationship between the adolescents and their

fathers, the less internal and external behavior manifestation were reported by the adolescent.

Father Visitation

The single parent families revealed the following amounts of visitation by the father: more than once a week--21%; once a week--11.1%; twice a month--14.8%; once a month--11.1%; less than once a month--187.5%; never--23.5%. There is a positive association between the amount of visitation and the parents relationship (r = .40, p < .01). Another positive relationship was found between the age of the adolescent at the time of the parents' separation and the amount of visitation that the father makes(r = .42, p = .01). The older the child at the time of separation the more visits the father makes to the family. More that half of the adolescents and mothers are satisfied with the amount of father visitation. The wish for more father visits is negatively related to the adolescents' relationship to their mothers'(r = -.32, p = .04) and their feelings about living with one parent (r = -.40, p = .01).

Adolescent Functioning

There was no real difference in the reported levels of school performance between the single parent and dual parent adolescents and the male and female adolescents. More than half of the adolescents reported that their school performance was "good"; and only 2.7% of all the adolescents admitted that their performance in school was poor. However 12.5% of the adolescents in this study had graduated and 17.6% of them had dropped out. The reported adolescent school performance was positively correlated with their relationship with their father(r = .35, p = .03).

In school attendance, the male adolescent stated that they were better at coming to school than did the female adolescents($x^2(6, N = 80) = 16.31$, $p = .01$). Reportedly, 75% of the adolescents thought their attendance was "good" while 25% that their attendance was poor. The level of the relationship between the adolescent and their fathers was positively associated with the adolescents' school attendance.

Most of the adolescents believed themselves to have many friends, while 20.1% of them reported having a few or no friends. There were no differences in the reported number of friends between genders or the adolescents from single or dual parent households.

Future Marriage Plans

There were no differences between gender and family structure in the adolescents' marriage perspective. More than 50% were planning on getting married, and did not believe that their view of their ability to have a successful marriage was influenced by their parents' separation. There was a positive correlation between the adolescents' relationship with their fathers and their future marriage plans($r = .35$, $p < .05$). In other words, the better the relationship between the adolescents and their father more the adolescents planned on getting married and believed that they would be successful in marriage.

The Effect of Separation

Female adolescents reported more negative effects from the divorce and separation than did the male adolescents($t(36.57) = 2.62$, $p = .01$). The mothers of the adolescents thought that the separation was more positive for the adolescents than they did themselves. Male adolescents were told about the reason for the separation more often than the female adolescents($t(27.05)$

= 2.34, p = .01) and have more of an understanding about the reasons for their parents' separation than do the female adolescents($t(24.21) = 3.06$, $p = .01$). More than half he adolescents reported thinking that their parents separation was a good idea.

Level of Emotionality

Day to day, the adolescents saw themselves as being happy (55% reported their day to day feeling as "happy"). However, the dual parent adolescents reported being "happy" more often than the dual parent family($t(77.58) = 2.15$, $p = .04$). Male adolescents reported being "happy" more often than females ($t(77.83) = 2.11$, $p = .05$). There was a negative correlation between the adolescents' day to day feelings and their level of external problem behaviors($r = -.28$, $p = .01$). So, the more positive the adolescent felt day to day the less external problem behaviors were reported by the adolescents. The mothers' reported levels of emotionality were positively associated with their relationship with their sons' or daughters' father($r = .29$, $p = .01$) and the number of problems they were experiencing. Financial problems were reported their number one concern, and their relationship with their ex-husbands being her second most named problem.

Discussion

Research on the Puerto Rican family and single parent families in particular has become a pressing need due the growing association of family structure and mental health needs. This study further looked at the adjustment levels of Puerto Rican adolescents and the relationship of these adjustment levels when compared to those who grew up in single parent or dual parent families. The findings of this study revealed results that were consistent with previous research that showed more external behavior problems

in adolescents from single parent families than from dual parent families with the male adolescent revealing more problems adjusting to a single parent structure with the mother being the head of the household in their family than the female adolescents.

Finally, this study supports the important influence that the father still has in the Puerto Rican family and with his adolescent son. The relationship that the adolescent has with both parents is still an important factor in the personal adjustment of the Puerto Rican adolescent and can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon.

Public policy, prevention and intervention programs can take these findings into consideration when working with at-risk Puerto Rican adolescents. Future research should include further exploration of the interactional effects of the custodial and non-custodial parents on the external behavior problems of the adolescents. The effects of conflict in the family on the adjustment of the adolescents needs a more in depth study, which will facilitate a more comprehensive view and understanding of the Puerto Rican adolescent, their families, and their needs.

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Table 1

T Test of Independent Means Between Single Parent and Dual Parent Family Adolescents on the External Scale

Adolescents	Number of Cases	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Single parent	40	14.55	12.60
Dual parent	40	7.90	7.88
	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-tail Probability
	2.83	65.43	.01

Table 2

T Test of Independent Means Between the Mothers of Single Parent and Dual Parent Family Adolescents on the External Scale Scores

Adolescents	Number of Cases	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Single parent	40	10.22	9.10
Dual parent	39	7.05	8.55
	t Value	Degrees of Freedom	2-tail Probability
	1.60	77	.11

Table 3

Independent t Tests Comparing Male and Female Puerto Rican Adolescents

Scales	t	p value
Beck's Depression Inventory (Total Score)	- .52	.60
Youth Self-Report (Sum of Total Problems)	.28	.78
Sum Internalizing	.13	.90
Sum Externalizing	- .07	.74
Youth Self-Report (Sum of Competence Scale)	1.97	.04*
Child Attribution Style Questionnaire (P-N)	- .87	.37
Positive Events (Composite Score--CP)	1.09	.28
Negative Events (Composite Score--CN)	1.35	.18
Mothers		
Child Behavior Checklist (Sum of Problem Items)	.74	.46
Sum of Internalizing	.83	.41
Sum of Externalizing	.62	.57
Child Behavior Checklist (Sum of Competency Items	1.71	.09

*Statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 4

Simple Comparison Test of Male Single and Dual Parent Adolescents

Scales	F	p value
Beck's Depressive Inventory (Total Score)	4.98	.03
Youth Self-Report Sum of Total Problems)	8.61*	<.01
Sum Internalizing	3.99	.05
Sum Externalizing	6.29*	<.01
Youth Self-Report (Sum of Competence Scale	1.92	.17
Child Attribution Style Questionnaire (P-N)	.00	.95
Positive Events (Composite Score--CP)	6.97*	<.01
Negative Events (Composite Score--CN)	3.36	.07

*Statistically significant at the $p < .0125$ level, using the modified Dunn-Bonferroni method to correct for Type I errors.

Table 5

Simple Comparison Test of Female Single and Dual Parent Adolescents

Scales	F	p value
Beck's Depression Inventory (Total Score)	.45	.51
Youth Self-Report (Sum of Total Problems)	.25	.62
Sum Internalizing	.01	.92
Sum Externalizing	.06	.81
Youth Self-Report (Sum of Competence Scale)	.04	.83
Child Attribution Style Questionnaire (P-N)	.20	.66
Positive Events (Composite Score--CP)	.02	.90
Negative Events (Composite Score--CN)	.24	.63

Table 6

Regression Analysis of Variables Affecting the Level of Attribution Style in Single Parent Adolescents

Variable	B	β	t	P value
1	.156	.314	1.864	.07
2	- .059	-.126	- .798	.43
3a	-2.140	-.388	-2.288*	.03
3b	-1.270	-.394	-2.035*	.05
3c	.164	.043	.188	.85
4	-1.266	-.394	-.007	.99
			R^2_{adj} = .32, $F_{(6,33)}$ = 2.57, p = .04	

1 = age of child at separation
2 = length of time since separation
3a = amount of conflict prior to separation
3b = conflict in current parental relationship
3c = amount that mother agrees with father
4 = number of time father visits